

FOOD FARE



BRAISED shoulder of lamb.



GRAPE cheese pie.



CHICKEN in vine leaves.

VINE DINING

A new restaurant in Thailand's wine country offers fine Western fare in a natural setting

■ Laurie Rosenthal
The Nation

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for something you and your family can do on a weekend (or even on holiday), just jump in your car (or take a bus) to Khao Yai. The trip is short - only two hours - and at the foot of the hills, a brief way up the road, you can drop by Granmonte and visit the culmination of one family's 10-year dream.

Scarcely a decade ago, Visooth Lohitnavy and his wife Sakuna invested in more than 100 rai in the Khao Yai foothills. Visooth was thinking about grapes and wine; Sakuna, about a little restaurant that would feature the Western food her family grew up with.

The two didn't simply rush out and start buying vines. Instead, they hired a German wine expert to

act as adviser. Educated in Germany, Visooth has never enjoyed beer, but during his years abroad, he came to enjoy wine. At the same time, Sakuna began perfecting her recipes, consulting her friends who ran their own restaurants or who produced their own foods and preserves.

They began planting shiraz and syrah grapes as well as chenin blanc, producing their first wines about five years ago.

They began construction as well. Their "dream home", a lovely, one-storey Pacific-colonial style home with lofty ceilings, was completed last year, as was the restaurant, designed in the same style - and what they call their "wine cellar door" named Montino.

Today, their winery produces 60,000 bottles, both red and white, and they sell the majority of their wines in Montino, which has developed into a rather eclectic gift shop. Not only can you purchase the Granmonte

wines here; Sakuna offers her very fine sauces and preserves (do check out her red-wine jelly). Her friends have contributed their own products as well - honey from Chiang Mai, homemade biscuits and imported beauty products.

The shop is so popular that Granmonte is currently building an extension.

Their Vincotto Restaurant is extremely popular as well. On a given day, you'll see families dropping by for lunch or dinner, couples looking for a romantic get-away, even former politicians off in a corner deep in discussion with friends.

In the pleasant ambience, diners can sit inside in air-conditioning, or outside on a veranda overlooking a huge pond, home to turtles and lily pads.

When Sakuna was setting up her menu, she decided almost immediately to serve Western food, but the dishes would have to come from her family. These are the recipes her children have come to love, and also guests to her home and friends invited for tasting sessions.

Call the dishes deceptively simple - at least the menu makes them seem so - but Sakuna designs her dishes to go along with the wine theme. With her chicken wrapped in vine leaves (Bt290) (the latter come, of course, from the vineyard), the leaves are steamed in cabernet sauvignon. The accompa-

nying sauce itself is made with verjus, the juice from unripe grapes.

Her foie gras (Bt780) is served with a grape and verjus sauce. Her beef tenderloin with foie gras is served with a cognac cream.

Although fairly short, the menu is geared for any sort of taste, offering seafood, pork, chicken, beef and veal dishes, and even venison and ostrich. There's even a pasta section.

Save room for dessert, though. Her sweets are not too sweet and are made fresh every day.

If you wish to stay overnight in Khao Yai, the Granmonte staff can help you find a hotel or guesthouse nearby (but book in advance). Eventually, even Granmonte will offer accommodation - perhaps next year.

They've also probably started a family tradition. A third-year student at the University of Adelaide in Australia, daughter Nikki has just been

awarded the Fosters Wine Estates Prize for excellence and enthusiasm in her studies of oenology (the study of winemaking).

Should you wish to sample a selection of Granmonte wines, the Pacific City Club is offering a wine dinner this Wednesday (July 11), featuring a seven-course menu of Thai dishes with a Western twist (Bt1,750). For reservations, call (02) 653 2450.

Vincotto Restaurant

Granmonte Vineyard and Wines
Khao Yai, Nakhon Ratchasima
Open every day, 11am-8pm
Tel (036) 227 3345,
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All major credit cards accepted

PRAWN AND SEEDLESS grape salad.

